

A day in the life of... Karen Tristham Brown

A chance to talk to staff and sets of press-ups help make the pupils in this English teacher's class self-regulated and resilient at the Boxing Academy in London

Karen Tristham Brown



On three days of the week, I begin work at 8.15am, but for the other two, it's a 9.30am start after taking my daughter to school. One of the great things about working in an alternative provision school is the flexibility it affords. My headteacher is happy to adjust my timetable to make the school-run possible.

As I arrive at work, a student will often offer to carry my bike up the steps or carry my bag into the building. Our students – who have all been excluded from mainstream education, or are here on managed moves – have lovely manners. This is especially important because our school building is so cramped – we spend our days squeezing past each other. If students arrive before 8.40am, they can make themselves a bagel before lessons begin at 9.00am. I will chat with them about their evening or weekend as I make my coffee. We have 40 students aged 14-16 years old, so we get to know them all really well.

The rise in the number of permanent exclusions in this country is staggering. Mainstream schools are giving up on so many disaffected teenagers, with devastating consequences. Many of our students arrive angry, despondent and feeling let down. We focus on changing this by developing strong relationships, setting clear, consistent boundaries and rewarding good behaviour.

I teach English language GCSE to all five "pods" of eight students every day. Each pod is mentored by a pod leader – a competitive boxer – who, as well as teaching the students boxing, accompanies them to each lesson to support learning and to manage behaviour. I love it when my classes have just had boxing. They moan about not being able to write because their hands are shaking, but they are calm, focused and more attentive.

Pod leaders and teachers work together as a team. Because I don't have to deal with negative behaviour, my relationships with the students are never jeopardised. If there is a problem, the pod leader takes control, which allows me to continue to deliver the lesson. If students don't follow instructions, they are given press ups. I can be writing on the whiteboard and then turn around to discover a student at my feet doing a set of 25. The pod leaders have the patience of saints and achieve remarkable results.

The hardest part of my job is when students are absent and fall behind with work. Many already have significant gaps in their knowledge because of their disrupted education and playing catch up is frustrating.

The best thing about my job? Definitely the students: they are hilarious and make me laugh every day. They are often contrary, demanding and unpredictable, but they are also warm, empathetic and appreciative of the help they receive. A lot of them come from challenging backgrounds lacking in structure and discipline. We address this in many ways. If a student is consistently late, a pod leader will pick them up in the morning. By the end of Year 11, our students leave us as self-regulated, resilient, and mature young adults who are hopeful for their futures.

At the end of the day, if there's a birthday, we will always celebrate with cake before students leave at 3.05pm. Staff then meet to discuss student progress and any other issues. I usually leave by 5pm, already anticipating what the next day will bring.

Karen Tristham Brown is an English teacher at The Boxing Academy in London. The Boxing Academy was named alternative provision school of the year in the [Tes Schools Awards 2017](#)